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A NEST OF THE DUSKY HORNED LARK

By CLARENCE HAMILTON KENNEDY

WITH ONE DRAWING BY THE AUTHOR

WHILE walking through the sage brush on March 26, I almost stepped on the nest of a pair of Dusky Horned Larks (*Otocoris alpestris merrilli*). The Dusky Lark is the most common bird in the brush areas of the Lower Yakima Valley, but nevertheless this is only the second nest I have found in four seasons. Because of the very quiet and furtive habits of the birds, they never betray the location of nests, which are found only by stumbling onto them.

This one was a cup-shaped depression, dug in the sand at the base of a sage bush, thickly lined with soft grass, leaves and stems, and with shreds of sage brush bark. In the bottom was a thick layer of the soft downy pappus of some composite. The nest contained three young, which were not more than two days old, for they were very small and their eyes were not yet open, while they were scantily covered with creamy down. I lingered over the nest several minutes, but the bird which I supposed was a parent remained on a fence post fifty yards away, and did not show any great distress. One young opened his bill but none made any sound.

I visited the nest again four days later, on March 30. As on the first visit, no parent bird was discovered near the nest, but after I had spent several minutes trying to adjust a camera for a picture, one of them circled about at a distance of thirty feet uttering sharp cries, and finally flew to a fence fifty yards away, where it perched during the remainder of my stay. The three young on this day had increased wonderfully in size. They were so large that they were crowding out of the nest. The illustration shows them as they appeared at this time. Their eyes were wide open and they were fully feathered, with only a vestige of down about the neck. The individual birds occupied the same positions in the nest that they had on my previous visit. With the exception of the white underneath the

body, they were uniformly dark brown with a crescent shaped, or in some cases a v-shaped, creamy spot at the tips of the feathers. They were very quiet in the nest taking no notice of my proximity further than closing their eyes, which they kept closed until I had been near the nest for a minute or two. As their bright eyes are their most conspicuous part, perhaps this closing of them is an aid to their remaining undiscovered by predatory animals.

My third visit to the nest was on April 1. It was empty, but probably the young had left in due time, as the old birds were more anxious than before while I remained in the vicinity. The young had left the nest, probably the sixth day after hatching, at the latest, the eighth day. While seemingly a very early nesting



Fig. 40. DUSKY HORNED LARK—A FAMILY GROUP

time and one of very short duration, it is entirely in keeping with the breeding habits of the other inhabitants of the sage brush of this part of the Yakima Valley. Here the rainfall is only eight to twelve inches and most of it falls between September and March. Reproduction in nearly all animals takes place coincidentally with the very short growing season of plant life, which occurs with the first warmth of spring and before the dry spring winds have entirely robbed the soil of its scanty supply of moisture. March weather here is cold and raw, but I have noticed in the case of the horned larks' nests that each was placed on the warm south side of a bush; also that insects were numerous, especially ground species such as ants and beetles.